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Germans on the Somme.



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THE GERMANS ON THE SOMME

BY
PHILIP GIBBS.

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THE GERMANS ON THE SOMME.

I.

THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

The capture of Beaumont-Hamel, on the 13th day of this month, with more than 6,000 prisoners, after a lull in which the progress of our offensive seemed to have been brought to a halt by weather, was undoubtedly the biggest surprise and shock we have yet given to the German High Command on the Western front.

There may be other surprises of the same kind in store for them—I think there will be—but now it is a good time to look back a little and see as closely as possible what our soldiers have achieved, actually, by so much heroism and so much sacrifice.

In this and one or two articles which may follow I propose to give a picture of the great struggle as it was watched and directed by the German staff, and as it was carried out by the German troops. My narrative is not coloured by imagination or bias. It is coloured

only by the red vision of great bloodshed, for the story of the Somme battles on the German side is ghastly and frightful.

From January to May of this year the German Command on the Western front was concentrating all its energy and all its available strength in man power and gun power upon the attack of Verdun. The Crown Prince had staked all his reputation upon this adventure, which he believed would end in the capture of the strongest French fortress and the destruction of the French armies.

He demanded men and more men until every unit that could be spared from other fronts of the line had been thrown into this furnace. Divisions were called in from other theatres of war, and increased the strength on the Western front to a total of about 130 divisions.

FEAR OF OUR OFFENSIVE.

But the months passed, and Verdun still held out above piles of German corpses on its slopes, and in June Germany looked East and saw a great menace. The Russian offensive was becoming violent. German generals on the Russian fronts sent desperate messages for help. "Send us more men" they said and from the Western front four divisions containing 39 battalions were sent to them.

They must have been sent grudgingly, for now another menace threatened the enemy, and it was on the Western side. The British Armies were getting ready to strike. In spite of Verdun, France still had men enough—withdrawn from a part of the line in which they had been relieved by the British—to co-operate in a new attack.

It was our offensive that the German Command feared most, for they had no exact knowledge of our strength or of the quality of our new troops. They knew that our Army had grown prodigiously since the assault on Loos, nearly a year before.

PREPARING FOR THE BLOW.

They had heard of the Canadian reinforcements, and the coming of the Australians, and the steady increase of recruiting in England, and month by month they had heard the louder roar of our guns along the line, and had seen their destructive effect spreading and becoming more terrible. They knew of the steady, quiet, concentration of batteries and divisions on the north and south of the Ancre.

The German Command expected a heavy blow, and prepared for it, but as yet had no knowledge of the driving force behind it. What confidence they had of being able to resist the British attack was based upon the wonderful strength of the lines which they had been digging and fortifying since the autumn of the first year of war—"impregnable positions" they had called them—the inexperience of our troops, their own immense quantity of machine-guns, the courage and skill of their gunners, and their profound belief in the superiority of German Generalship.

In order to prevent espionage during the coming struggle, and to conceal the movement of troops and guns, they ordered the civil populations to be removed from villages close behind their positions, drew cordons of military police across the country, picketed cross-roads, and established a network of counter espionage to prevent any leakage of information.

To inspire the German troops with a spirit of

martial fervour (not easily aroused to fever-pitch after the bloody losses before Verdun) Orders of the Day were issued to the battalions counselling them to hold fast against the hated English, who stood foremost in the way of peace (that was the gist of a manifesto by Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, which I found in a dug-out at Montauban), and promising them a speedy ending to the war.

GREAT STORES OF MUNITIONS.

Great stores of material and munitions were concentrated at railheads and dumps ready to be sent up to the firing lines, and the perfection of German organisation may well have seemed flawless—before the attack began.

The British attack began with the great bombardment several days before July 1st and was a revelation, to the German Command and to the soldiers who had to endure it, of the new and enormous power of our artillery. A number of batteries were unmasked for the first time, and the German gunners found that in "heavies" and in expenditure of high explosives they were outclassed.

They were startled, too, by the skill and accuracy of the British gunners whom they had scorned as "amateurs" and by the daring of our airmen who flew over their lines with the utmost audacity "spotting" for the guns, and registering on batteries, communication trenches, cross-roads, railheads, and every vital point of organisation in the German war-machine working opposite the British lines north and south of the Ancre.

Even before the British infantry had left their trenches at dawn on July 1 German officers behind

the firing lines saw with anxiety that all the organisation which had worked so smoothly in times of ordinary trench-warfare was now working only in a hazardous way under a deadly storm of shells.

FATE OF STAFF OFFICERS.

Food and supplies of all kinds could not be sent up to front line trenches without many casualties, and sometimes could not be sent up at all. Telephone wires were cut, and communications broken between the front and headquarter staffs. Staff officers sent up to report were killed on the way to the lines. Troops moving forward from reserve areas came under heavy fire and lost many men before arriving in the support trenches.

Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, sitting aloof from all this in personal safety, must have known before July 1 that his resources in men and material would be strained to the uttermost by the British attack, but he could take a broader view than men closer to the scene of battle, and taking into account the courage of his troops (he had no need to doubt that), the immense strength of their positions, dug and tunnelled beyond the power of high explosives, the number of his machine-guns, the concentration of his artillery and the rawness of the British troops, he could count up the possible cost and believe that in spite of a heavy price to pay there would be no great break in his lines.

At 7.30 a.m. on July 1 the British infantry left their trenches and attacked on the right angle southwards from Gommecourt, Beaumont Hamel, Thiepval, Ovillers, and La Boisselle, and eastwards from Fricourt, below Mametz and Montauban. For

a week the German troops—Bavarians and Prussians—had been crouching in their dug-outs, listening to the ceaseless crashing of the British “drum-fire.”

In places like Beaumont Hamel the men down in the deep tunnels—some of them large enough to hold a battalion and a half—were safe as long as they stayed there. But to get in or out was death. Trenches disappeared into a sea of shell-craters, and the men holding them—for some men had to stay on duty there—were blown to fragments of flesh.

Many of the shallower dug-outs were smashed in by heavy shells, and officers and men lay dead there as I saw them lying on the first days of July, in Fricourt and Mametz and Montauban.

The living men kept their courage, but below ground, under that tumult of bursting shells, wrote pitiful letters to their people at home describing the horror of those hours. “We are quite shut off from the rest of the world,” wrote one of them. “Nothing comes to us. No letters. The English keep such a barrage on our approaches it is terrible. To-morrow evening it will be seven days since this bombardment began. We cannot hold out much longer. Everything is shot to pieces.”

TORTURES OF THIRST.

Thirst was one of their tortures. In many of the tunnelled shelters there was food enough, but the water could not be sent up. The German soldiers were maddened by thirst. When rain fell many of them crept out and drank filthy water mixed with yellow shell sulphur, and then were killed by high explosives. Other men crept out, careless of death but compelled to drink. They crouched over the

bodies of the men who lay above, or in, the shell-holes, and lapped up the puddles, and then crawled down again if they were not hit.

When our infantry attacked at Gommecourt and Beaumont Hamel and Thiepval they were received by waves of machine-gun bullets fired by men who, in spite of the ordeal of our seven days' bombardment, came out into the open now, at the moment of attack which they knew through their periscopes was coming. They brought their guns above the shell-craters of their destroyed trenches under our barrage and served them.

They ran forward even into No Man's Land, and planted their machine-guns there and swept down our men as they charged. Over their heads the German gunners flung a frightful barrage ploughing dreadful gaps in the ranks of our splendid men, who would not be checked, whatever their losses might be, until they had reached the enemy's lines.

OUR OVERWHELMING WAVES.

On the left, by Gommecourt and Beaumont Hamel, the British attack did not succeed in all its objectives, though the German line was pierced, and if this had been all the line of battle the enemy's Generals at the end of that day might have said, "It is well. We can hold them back."

But southward the "impregnable" lines were smashed by a tide of British soldiers as sand castles are overwhelmed by the waves. Our men swept up to Fricourt, struck straight up to Montauban on the right, captured it, and flung a loop round Mametz village.

For the German Generals, receiving their reports with great difficulty because runners were killed and

telephones broken, the question was, "How will these British troops fight in the open after their first assault? How will our men stand between the first line and the second?"

As far as the German troops were concerned there were no signs of cowardice, or "low moral" as we call it more kindly, in those early days of the struggle. They fought with a desperate courage, holding on to positions in rearguard actions when our guns were slashing them, and when our men were getting near to them making us pay a heavy price for every little copse or gully or section of trench, and above all serving their machine-guns at La Boisselle, Ovillers, above Fricourt, round Contalmaison, and at all points of their gradual retreat, with a splendid obstinacy until they were killed or captured. But they could not check our men, or stop their progress.

REVISED OPINIONS.

After the first week of battle the German General Staff had learnt the truth about the qualities of those British "New Armies" which had been mocked and caricatured in German comic papers. They learnt that these "amateur soldiers" had the qualities of the finest troops in the world—not only extreme valour but skill and cunning, not only a great power of endurance under the heaviest fire, but a spirit of attack which was terrible in its effect.

They were great bayonet fighters. Once having gained a bit of earth or a ruined village nothing would budge them unless they could be blasted out by gunfire. General Sixt von Arnim put down some candid notes in his report to Prince Rupprecht.

"The English infantry shows great dash in attack, a factor to which immense confidence in its overwhelming artillery greatly contributes. . . . It has shown great tenacity in defence. This was especially noticeable in the case of small parties which when once established with machine guns in the corner of a wood or a group of houses were very difficult to drive out."

The German losses were piling up. The great agony of the German troops under our shell fire was reaching unnatural limits of torture. The early prisoners I saw—Prussians and Bavarians of the 14th Reserve Corps—were nerve-broken, and told frightful stories of the way in which their regiments had been cut to pieces. The German Generals had to fill up the gaps, to put new barriers of men against the waves of British infantry. They flung new troops into the line, called up hurriedly from reserve depots.

STAFF DEMORALISATION.

But now, for the first time, their staff work showed signs of disorder and demoralisation. When the Prussian Guards reserves were brought up from Valenciennes to counter-attack at Contalmaison they were sent on to the battlefield without maps or local guides, and walked straight into our barrage. A whole battalion was cut to pieces, and many others suffered frightful things. Some of the prisoners told me that they had lost three-quarters of their number in casualties and our troops advanced over heaps of killed and wounded.

The 122nd Bavarian regiment in Contalmaison was among those which suffered horribly. Owing to our ceaseless gun-fire they could get no food supplies

and no water. The dugouts were crowded, so that they had to take turns to get into these shelters, and outside our shells were bursting over every yard of ground.

"Those who went outside," a prisoner told me, "were killed or wounded. Some of them had their heads blown off, and some of them had both their legs torn off, and some of them their arms. But we went on taking turns in the hole, although those who went outside knew that it was their turn to die, most likely. At last most of those who came into the hole were wounded, some of them badly, so that we lay in blood." It is one little picture in a great panorama of bloodshed.

The German Command was not thinking much about the human suffering of its troops. It was thinking, necessarily, of the next defensive line upon which they would have to fall back if the pressure of the British offensive could be maintained—the Longueval-Bazentin-Pozières line. It was getting nervous. Owing to the enormous efforts made in the Verdun offensive the supplies of ammunition were not adequate to the enormous demand.

The German gunners were trying to compete with the British in continuity of bombardments and the shells were running short. Guns were wearing out under this incessant strain, and it was difficult to replace them. General von Gallwitz received reports of "an alarmingly large number of bursts in the bore, particularly in field guns."

General von Arnim complained that "reserve supplies of ammunition were only available in very small quantities." The German telephone system proved "totally inadequate in consequence of the

development which the fighting took." The German air service was surprisingly weak, and the British airmen had established a complete mastery.

"The numerical superiority of the enemy's airmen," noted General von Arnim, "and the fact that their machines were better made, became disagreeably apparent to us, particularly in their direction of the enemy's artillery fire and in bomb-dropping."

FEAR OF BRITISH BAYONETS.

On July 15, one of the greatest days in the history of the Somme battles, the British troops broke the German second line at Longueval and the Bazentins, and inflicted great losses upon the enemy, who fought with their usual courage until the British bayonets were among them.

A day or two later the fortress of Ovillers fell, and the remnants of the garrison—150 strong—after a desperate and gallant resistance in ditches and tunnels where they had fought to the last, surrendered with honour.

Then began the long battle of the woods—Devil's Wood, High Wood, Trones Wood—continued through August with most fierce and bloody fighting, which ended in our favour and forced the enemy back, gradually but steadily, in spite of the terrific bombardments which filled those woods with hell-fire, and the constant counter-attacks delivered by the Germans.

"Counter-attack!" came the order from the German Staff—and battalions of men marched out obediently to certain death, sometimes with incredible folly on the part of their commanding officers, who ordered these attacks to be made without the slightest chance of success.

CRY OF AGONY.

In all the letters written during those weeks of fighting and captured by us from dead or living men there is one great cry of agony and horror.

"I stood on the brink of the most terrible days of my life," wrote one of them. "They were those of the battle of the Somme. It began with a night attack on August 13-14. The attack lasted till the evening of the 18th, when the English wrote on our bodies in letters of blood: 'It is all over with you.' A handful of half-mad, wretched creatures, worn out in body and mind, were all that was left of a whole battalion. We were that handful."

The losses of many of the German battalions were staggering, and by the middle of August the moral of the troops was severely shaken. So far as I can ascertain, the 117th Division by Pozières suffered very heavily. The 11th Reserve and 157th Regiments each lost nearly three-quarters of their effectives. The IX. Reserve Corps had also lost heavily. The 9th Reserve Jaeger Battalion also lost about three-quarters, the 84th Reserve and 86th Reserve over half. On August 10 the 16th Division had six battalions in reserve.

By August 19, owing to the large number of casualties, the greater part of those reserves had been absorbed into the front and support trenches, leaving as available reserves two exhausted battalions.

The weakness of the division and the absolute necessity of reinforcing it led to the 15th Reserve Infantry Regiment (2nd Guards Division) being brought up to strengthen the right flank in the Leipzig salient. This regiment had suffered casualties to the

extent of over 50 per cent. west of Pozières during the middle of July, and showed no eagerness to return to the fight. These are but a few examples of what was happening along the whole of the German front on the Somme.

EXHAUSTED DIVISIONS.

It became apparent by the end of August that the enemy was having considerable difficulty in finding fresh troops to relieve his exhausted divisions, and that the wastage was faster than the arrival of fresh troops. It was also noticeable that he left divisions in the line until incapable of further effort rather than relieving them earlier so that after resting they might again be brought on to the battlefield. The only conclusion to be drawn from this was that the enemy had not sufficient formations available to make the necessary reliefs.

In July three of these exhausted divisions were sent to the East, their place being taken by two new divisions, and in August three more exhausted divisions were sent to Russia, eight new divisions coming to the Somme front. The British and French offensive was drawing in all the German reserves and draining them of their life's blood.

"We entrained at Savigny," wrote a man of one of these regiments, "and at once knew our destination. It was our old Blood-bath—the Somme."

In many letters this phrase was used. The Somme was called the "Bath of Blood" by the German troops who waded across its shell-craters, and in the ditches which were heaped with their dead. But what I have described is only the beginning of the battle, and the bath was to be filled deeper in the months that followed.

II.

"THE BATH OF BLOOD."

Before the ending of the first phase of the Battles of the Somme—the second phase begins, I imagine, with our great advance on September 15 from the Pozières-Longueval-Guillemont line—the German troops had invented a terrible name to describe this great ordeal ; it was "The Blood Bath of the Somme."

The name and the news could not be hidden from the people of Germany, who had already been chilled with horror by the losses at Verdun, nor from the soldiers of reserve regiments quartered in French and Belgian towns like Valenciennes, St. Quentin, Cambrai, Lille, Bruges, and as far back as Brussels, waiting to go to the front, nor from the civil population of those towns held for two years by their enemy—these blonde young men who lived in their houses, marched down their streets, and made love to their women.

The news was brought down from the Somme front by Red Cross trains, arriving in endless succession, and packed with maimed and mangled men. German military policemen formed cordons round the railway stations, pushed back civilians who came to stare with sombre eyes at these blanketed bundles of living flesh, but when the ambulances rumbled through the streets towards the hospitals—long processions of them, with the soles of men's boots turned up over the stretchers on which they lay quiet and stiff—the tale was told though no word was spoken.

BAD NEWS BADLY TAKEN.

The tale of defeat, of great losses, of grave and increasing anxiety, was told clearly enough—as I have read in captured letters—by the faces of German officers who went about in these towns behind the lines with gloomy looks, and whose tempers, never of the sweetest, became irritable and unbearable so that the soldiers hated them for all this cursing and bullying. A certain battalion commander has a nervous breakdown because he has to meet his colonel in the morning.

“He is dying with fear and anxiety,” writes one of his comrades. Other men, not battalion commanders, are even more afraid of their superior officers, upon whom this bad news from the Somme has an evil effect.

The bad news was spread by divisions taken out of the line and sent back to rest. The men reported that their battalions had been cut to pieces. Some of their regiments had lost three-quarters of their strength. They described the frightful effect of the British artillery—the smashed trenches, the shell-craters, the great horror.

It is not good for the moral of men who are just going up there to take their turn.

The man who was afraid of his colonel “sits all day long writing home with the picture of his wife and children before his eyes.” He is afraid of other things.

BAVARIANS BEAR THE BRUNT.

Bavarian soldiers quarrelled with Prussians, accused them (unjustly) of shirking the Somme battlefields and leaving the Bavarians to go to the blood-bath,

"All the Bavarian troops are being sent to the Somme (this much is certain, you can see no Prussians there), and this in spite of the losses the 1st Bavarian Corps suffered recently at Verdun! And how we did suffer! . . . It appears that we are in for another turn, at least the 5th Bavarian Division. Everybody has been talking about it for a long time. To the devil with it! Every Bavarian regiment is being sent into it, and it's a swindle."

It was in no cheerful mood that men went away to the Somme battlefields. Those battalions of grey-clad men entrained without any of the old enthusiasm with which they had gone to earlier battles. Their gloom was noticed by the officers.

"Sing, you sheep's heads, sing!" they shouted.

They were compelled to sing, by order.

"In the afternoon," wrote a man of the 18th Reserve Division, "we had to go out again: we were to learn to sing. The greater part did not join in, and the song went feebly. Then we had to march round in a circle and sing, and that went no better.

"After that we had an hour off, and on the way back to billets we were to sing 'Deutschland über Alles,' but this broke down completely. One never hears songs of the Fatherland any more."

They were silent, grave-eyed men who marched through the streets of French and Belgian towns to be entrained for the Somme front, for they had forebodings of the fate before them. Yet none of their forebodings were equal in intensity of fear to the frightful reality into which they were flung.

The journey to the Somme front on the German side was a way of terror, ugliness, and death. Not all the imagination of morbid minds searching obscenely

for foulness and blood in the great deep pits of human agony could surpass these scenes along the way to the German lines round Courcellette, and Flers, Guendecourt, Morval and Lesbœufs.

Many times, long before a German battalion had arrived near the trenches, it was but a collection of nerve-broken men bemoaning losses already suffered far behind the lines and filled with hideous apprehension. For British long-range guns were hurling high explosives into distant villages, barraging cross-roads, reaching out to railheads and ammunition dumps, while British airmen were on bombing flights over railway stations and rest-billets and high roads down which the German troops came marching at Cambrai, Bapaume, in the valley between Irles and Warlencourt, at Ligny-Thillois, Busigny, and many other places on the lines of route.

BOMBED BY OUR AIRMEN.

German soldiers arriving at Cambrai by train found themselves under the fire of a single aeroplane which flew very low and dropped bombs. They exploded with heavy crashes, and one bomb hit the first carriage behind the engine, killing and wounding several men.

A second bomb hit the station buildings, and there was a great clatter of broken glass, the rending of wood and the fall of bricks. All lights went out, and the German soldiers groped about in the darkness amidst the splinters of glass and the fallen bricks, searching for the wounded by the sound of their groans.

It was but one scene along the way to that blood-bath through which they had to wade to the trenches of the Somme.

Flights of British aeroplanes circled over the villages on the way. At Grevilliers, in August, eleven 112-16 bombs fell in the market square so that the centre of the village collapsed in a state of ruin, burying soldiers billeted there. Every day the British airmen paid these visits, meeting the Germans far up the roads on their way to the Somme, and swooping over them like a flying Death.

Even on the march in open country the German soldiers tramping silently along—not singing in spite of orders—were bombed and shot at by these British aviators, who flew down very low, pouring out streams of machine-gun bullets.

The Germans lost their nerve at such times, and scattered into the ditches, falling over each other, struck and cursed by their "unteroffizieren," and leaving their dead and wounded in the roadway.

CHAOS ON THE ROADS.

As the roads went nearer to the battlefields they were choked with the traffic of war, with artillery and transport wagons and horse ambulances, and always thousands of grey men marching up to the lines, or back from them, exhausted and broken after many days in the fires of hell up there.

Officers sat on their horses by the roadside directing all the traffic with the usual swearing and cursing, and rode alongside the transport wagons and the troops, urging them forward at a quicker pace, because of stern orders received from headquarters demanding quicker movement. The reserves, it seemed, were desperately wanted up in the lines. The English were attacking again.

God alone knew what was happening. Regiments had lost their way. Wounded were pouring back. Officers had gone mad. . . . Into the midst of all this turmoil shells fell—shells from long-range guns. Transport wagons were blown to bits. The bodies and fragments of artillery horses lay all over the roads. Men lay dead or bleeding under the debris of gun-wheels and broken bricks.

Above all the noise of this confusion and death in the night the hard, stern voices of German officers rang out, and German discipline prevailed and men marched on to greater perils.

IN THE SHELL ZONE.

They were in the shell zone now, and sometimes a regiment on the march was tracked all along the way by British gunfire directed from aeroplanes and captive balloons. It was the fate of a captured officer I met who had detrained at Bapaume for the trenches at Contalmaison. At Bapaume his battalion was hit by fragments of 12-inch shells.

Nearer to the line they came under the fire of 8-inch and 6-inch shells. Four-point-sevens found them somewhere by Bazentin. At Contalmaison they marched into a barrage, and here the officer was taken prisoner. Of his battalion there were few men left.

It was so with the 3rd Jaeger Battalion, ordered up hurriedly to make a counter-attack near Flers. They suffered so heavily on the way to the trenches that no attack could be made. The stretcher-bearers had all the work to do.

The way up to the trenches became more tragic as every kilometre was passed, until the stench of

corruption was wafted on the wind, so that men were sickened and tried not to breathe, and marched hurriedly to get on the lee side of its foulness. They walked now through places which had once been villages, but were sinister ruins where death lay in wait for German soldiers.

"It seems queer to me," wrote one of them, "that whole villages close to the front look as flattened as a child's toy run over by a steam roller. Not one stone remains on another. The streets are one line of shell-holes. Add to that the thunder of the guns, and you will see with what feelings we come into the line—into trenches where for months shells of all calibre have rained. . . . Flers is a scrap-heap."

Again and again men lost their way up to the lines. The reliefs could only be made at night, lest they should be discovered by British airmen and British gunners, and even if these German soldiers had trench-maps the guidance was but little good when many trenches had been smashed in, and only shell-craters could be found.

"In the front line of Flers," wrote one of these Germans, "the men were only occupying shell-holes. Behind there was the intense smell of putrefaction, which filled the trench—almost unbearably. The corpses lie either quite insufficiently covered with earth on the edge of the trench or quite close under the bottom of the trench, so that the earth lets the stench through. In some places bodies lie quite uncovered in a trench recess, and no one seems to trouble about them. One sees horrible pictures—here an arm, here a foot, here a head, sticking out of the earth. And these are all German soldiers—heroes !

"IMPOSSIBLE TO HOLD OUT."

"Not far from us at the entrance to a dug-out nine men were buried, of whom three were dead. All along the trench men kept on getting buried. What had been a perfect trench a few hours before was in parts completely blown in. . . . The men are getting weaker. It is impossible to hold out any longer. Losses can no longer be reckoned accurately. Without a doubt many of our people are killed."

That is only one out of thousands of such gruesome pictures, true as the death they described, which have gone home to German homes during the Battles of the Somme. These German soldiers are grand letter writers, and men sitting in wet ditches, in "fox-holes," as they call their dug-outs, "up to my waist in mud," as one of them described, scribbled pitiful things which they hoped might reach their people at home, as a voice from the dead. For they had had little hope of escape from the "blood-bath." "When you get this I shall be a corpse," wrote one of them, and one finds the same foreboding in many of these documents.

WRITTEN BY ONE NOW DEAD.

Even the lucky ones who could get some cover from the incessant bombardment by English guns began to lose their nerves after a day or two. They were always in fear of British infantry, sweeping upon them suddenly behind the "Trommel-feuer," rushing their dug-outs with bombs and bayonets. Sentries became "jumpy" and signalled attacks when there were no attacks. The gas-alarm was sounded constantly by the clang of a bell in the trench, and men

put on their heavy gas-masks and sat in them until they were nearly stifled.

Here is a little picture of life in a German dug-out near the British lines, written by a man now dead.

"The telephone bell rings. 'Are you there? Yes, here's Nau's battalion.' 'Good. That is all.' Then that ceases, and now the wire is in again, perhaps for the 25th or 30th time. Thus the night is interrupted, and now they come, alarm messages, one after the other, each more terrifying than the other, of enormous losses through the bombs and shells of the enemy, of huge masses of troops advancing upon us, of all possible possibilities, such as a man broken down and tortured by the terrors of the day can invent. Our nerves quiver. We clench our teeth. None of us can forget the horrors of the night."

Heavy rain fell, and the dug-outs became wet and filthy.

"Our sleeping-places were full of water. We had to try and bail out the trenches with cooking dishes. I lay down in the water with G——. We were to have worked on dug-outs, but not a soul could do any more. Only a few sections got coffee. Mine got nothing at all. I was frozen in every limb, poured the water out of my boots, and lay down again."

GENERAL STAFF ALARMED.

The German generals and their staffs could not be quite indifferent to all this welter of human suffering among their troops, in spite of the cold scientific spirit with which they regard the problem of war. The agony of the individual soldier would not trouble them. There is no war without agony. But the

psychology of masses of men had to be considered, because it affects the efficiency of the machine.

As I shall show, the German General Staff on the Western front were becoming seriously alarmed by the declining moral of their infantry under the increasing strain of the British attacks, and adopted stern measures to cure it. But they could not hope to cure the heaps of German dead who were lying on the battlefields, nor the maimed men who were being carried back to the dressing stations, nor to bring back the prisoners taken in droves by the French and British troops.

Before the attack on the Flers line, the capture of Thiepval, and the German débâcle at Beaumont-Hamel the enemy's command was already filled with a grave anxiety at the enormous losses of its fighting strength, was compelled to adopt new expedients for increasing the number of its divisions. It was forced to withdraw troops badly needed on other fronts, and, as I shall point out, the successive shocks of the British offensive reached as far as Germany itself, so that the whole of its recruiting system had to be revised to fill up the gaps torn out of the German ranks.

III.

THE BREAKING OF MORAL.

All through July and August the enemy's troops fought with great and stubborn courage, defending every bit of broken woodland, every heap of bricks that was once a village, every line of trenches smashed by heavy shell-fire, with obstinacy.

It is, indeed, fair and just to say that throughout these battles of the Somme up to the present day our men have fought against an enemy hard to beat, grim and resolute, and inspired sometimes with the courage of despair, which is hardly less dangerous than the courage of hope.

The Australians who struggled to get the high ground at Pozieres did not have an easy task. The enemy made many counter attacks against them. All the ground hereabouts was so smashed that the earth became finely powdered, and it was the arena of bloody fighting at close quarters which did not last a day or two, but many weeks. Mouquet Farm was like the Phoenix which rose again out of its ashes.

In its tunnelled ways German soldiers hid and came out to fight our men in the rear long after the site of the farm was in our hands. Delville Wood was a living horror, which could not for a long time be cleared of its devilish properties. Our shell fire slashed through its broken trees and our men fought their way over its barricades of fallen logs and dead bodies, but the German soldier crept back with machine-guns, and would not give up this place of dreadful memory. It was not until the beginning of September that it was finally taken.

FIGHTING REARGUARD ACTIONS.

But the German troops were fighting what they now knew to be a losing battle. They were fighting rearguard actions, trying to gain time for the hasty digging of ditches behind them, trying to sell their lives at the highest price.

They lived not only under incessant gun-fire, gradually weakening their nerve power, working a physical as well as a moral change in them, but in constant terror of British attacks.

They could never be sure of safety at any hour of the day or night, even in their deepest dug outs. The British varied their times of attack. At dawn, at noon, when the sun was reddening in the west, just before the dusk, in pitch darkness even, the steady, regular bombardment that had never ceased all through the days and nights would concentrate into the great tumult of sudden drum fire, and presently waves of men—English or Scottish or Irish, Australians or Canadians—would be sweeping on to them and over them, rummaging down into the dug-outs with bombs and bayonets, gathering up prisoners, quick to kill if men were not quick in surrender.

In this way Thiépvál was encircled so that the garrison there—the 180th Regiment, who had held it for two years—knew that they were doomed. In this way Guillemont and Ginchy fell, so that in the first place not a man out of 2,000 men escaped to tell the tale of horror in German lines, and in the second place there was no long fight against the Irish, who stormed it in a wild, fierce rush, which even machine-guns could not check.

SHORTAGE OF MUNITIONS.

The German General Staff was getting flurried, grabbing at battalions from short parts of the line, disorganising its divisions under the urgent need of flinging in men to stop this rot in the lines, ordering counter-attacks which were without any chance of success, so that thin waves of men came out into the open, as I have seen them myself, to be swept down by scythes of bullets which cut them clean to the earth. Before September 15 they hoped that the British offensive was wearing itself out. It seemed to them at least doubtful that after the struggle of two and a half months the British troops could still have spirit and strength enough to fling themselves against new lines.

Their own reserves of strength were failing to keep pace with the tremendous strain upon the whole machinery of their organisation.

Many of their guns had worn out, and could not be replaced quickly enough.

Many batteries had been knocked out in their emplacements along the line of Bazentin and Longueval before the artillery was drawn back to Grandcourt and a new line of safety.

Battalion commanders clamoured for greater supplies of hand grenades, entrenching tools, trench-mortars, signal rockets, and all kinds of fighting material enormously in excess of all previous requirements.

The difficulties of dealing with the wounded, who littered the battlefields and choked the roads with the traffic of ambulances became increasingly severe owing to the dearth of horses for transport and the longer range of British guns which had been brought far forward.

The German General Staff studied its next lines of defence away through Courcellette, Martinpuich, Lesbœufs, Morval, and Combles, and they did not look too good, but, with luck and the courage of German soldiers, and the exhaustion—surely those fellows were exhausted!—of British troops good enough.

TIDAL WAVE AND "TANKS."

On September 15 the German command had another great shock. The whole line of the British troops on the Somme front south of the Ancre rose out of their trenches and swept over the German defences in a great tide.

The defences broke hopelessly, and the waves dashed through. Here and there, as on the German left at Morval and Lesbœufs, the bulwarks stood for a time, but the British pressed against them and round them. On the German right, below the little river of the Ancre, Courcellette fell, and Martinpuich, and High Wood, which the Germans desired to hold at all costs, and had held against incessant attacks by great concentration of artillery, was captured and left behind by the London men. A new engine of war had come as a demoralising influence among German troops, spreading terror among them.

It was the first day out of those fantastic monsters the Tanks, strange and horrible in their surprise, very deadly in their action against machine-gun emplacements, not stopped by trenches or barbed-wire, or tree stumps, or refuse heaps of fallen houses. For the first time the Germans were outwitted in inventions of destruction, they who had been foremost in all engines of death.

It was the moment of real panic in the German lines—a panic reaching back from the troops to the High Command.

BLACK DAYS FOR THE ENEMY.

Ten days later, on September 25, when the British made a new advance—all this time the French were pressing forward too but that is no part of my story—Combles was evacuated without a fight and with a litter of dead in its streets; Gueudecourt, Lesbœufs, and Morval were lost by the Germans; and a day later Thiepval, the greatest fortress position next to Beaumont Hamel, fell, with all its garrison taken prisoners.

They were black days in the German Headquarters, where Staff officers heard the news over their telephones, and sent stern orders to artillery commanders and divisional Generals, and, after dictating new instructions that certain trench systems must be held at whatever price, heard that already they were lost.

It was at this time that the moral of the German troops on the Somme front showed most signs of breaking. In spite of all their courage the ordeal had been too hideous for them, and in spite of all their discipline, the iron discipline of the German soldier, they were on the edge of revolt. The intimate and undoubted facts of this break in the moral of the enemy's troops during this period reveal a pitiful picture of human agony.

"MERE MURDER."

"We are now fighting on the Somme with the English," wrote a man of the 17th Bavarian Regiment.

"You can no longer call it war. It is mere murder. We are at the focal point of the present battle in Foureaux Wood (near Guillemont). All my previous experience in this war—the slaughter at Ypres and the battle in the gravel-pit at Hulluch—are the purest child's play compared with this massacre, and that is much too mild a description. I hardly think they will bring us into the fight again, for we are in a very bad way."

"From September 12 to 27 we were on the Somme," wrote a man of the 10th Bavarians, "and my regiment had 1,500 casualties."

A detailed picture of the German losses under our bombardment is given in the diary of an officer captured in a trench near Flers, and dated September 22.

"The four days ending September 4 spent in the trenches were characterised by a continual enemy bombardment that did not abate for a single instant.

"The enemy had registered on our trenches with light, as well as medium and heavy batteries, notwithstanding that he had no direct observation from his trenches, which lie on the other side of the summit. His registering was done by his excellent air-service, which renders perfect reports of everything observed.

"During the first day, for instance, whenever the slightest movement was visible in our trenches during the presence, as is usually the case, of enemy aircraft flying as low as 300-400 yards, a heavy bombardment of the particular section took place. The very heavy losses during the first day brought about the resolution to evacuate the trenches during the daytime. Only a small garrison was left, the remainder with-

drawing to a part of the line on the left of the Martinpuich-Pozières road.

ENGLISH AIRMEN'S SUPERIORITY.

"The signal for a bombardment by heavies was given by the English aeroplanes. On the first day we tried to fire by platoons on the aeroplanes, but a second aeroplane retaliated by dropping bombs and firing his machine-gun at our troops. Our own airmen appeared only once for a short time behind our lines.

"While enemy aeroplanes are observing from early morning till late at night our own hardly ever venture near. The opinion is that our trenches cannot protect troops during a barrage of the shortest duration owing to lack of dug-outs.

"The enemy understands how to prevent with his terrible barrage the bringing up of building material and even how to hinder the work itself. The consequence is that our trenches are always ready for an assault on his part. Our artillery, which does occasionally put a heavy barrage on the enemy trenches at a great expense of ammunition, cannot cause similar destruction to him. He can bring his building material up, can repair his trenches as well as build new ones, can bring up rations and ammunition, and remove the wounded.

"The continual barrage on our lines of communication makes it very difficult for us to ration and relieve our troops, to supply water, ammunition and building material, to evacuate wounded, and causes heavy losses. This and the lack of protection from artillery fire and the weather, the lack of hot meals, the continual necessity of lying still in the same

place, the danger of being buried, the long time the wounded have to remain in the trenches, and chiefly the terrible effect of the machine and heavy artillery fire, controlled by an excellent air service, has a most demoralising effect on the troops.

"Only with the greatest difficulty could the men be persuaded to stay in the trenches under those conditions."

MORAL ROT THREATENED.

There were some who could not be persuaded to stay, if they could see any chance of deserting or malingering. For the first time on our front the German officers could not trust the courage of their men, nor their loyalty, nor their sense of discipline. All this horror of men blown to bits over living men, of trenches heaped with dead and dying, was stronger than courage, stronger than loyalty, stronger than discipline. A moral rot was threatening to bring the German troops on the Somme front to disaster.

Large numbers of men reported sick, and tried by every kind of trick to be sent back to base hospitals.

In the 4th Bavarian Division desertions were frequent, and several times whole bodies of men refused to go forward into the front line. The moral of men in the 393rd Regiment taken at Courcellette seemed to be very weak. One of the prisoners declared that they gave themselves up without firing a shot because they could trust the English not to kill them.

The platoon commander had gone away, and the prisoner was ordered to alarm the platoon in case of attack, but did not do so on purpose. They did not

shoot with rifles or machine-guns, and did not throw bombs.

OFFICERS WHO SHIRKED.

Many of the German officers were as demoralised as the men, shirking their posts in the trenches, shamming sickness, and even leading the way to surrender. Prisoners of the 361st Regiment, which lost 1,300 men in 15 days, told of officers who had refused to take their men up to the front line, and of whole companies who had declined to move when ordered to do so. An officer of the 74th Landwehr Regiment is said by prisoners to have told his men during our preliminary bombardment to surrender as soon as we attacked.

A German regimental Order says : "I must state with the greatest regret that the regiment during this change of position had to take notice of the sad fact that men of four of the companies, inspired by shameful cowardice, left their companies on their own initiative and did not move into line."

Another Order contains the same fact and a warning of what punishment may be meted out :—

"Proofs are multiplying of men leaving the position without permission and hiding at the rear. It is our duty—each at his post—to deal with this fact with energy and success."

Many Bavarians complained that their officers did not accompany them into the trenches, but went down to the hospitals with imaginary diseases. In any case, there was a great deal of real sickness, mental and physical. The ranks were depleted by men suffering from fever, pleurisy, jaundice, and stomach complaints

of all kinds, twisted up with rheumatism after lying in water-logged holes, lamed for life by bad cases of trench-foot, and nerve-broken so that they could do nothing but weep.

The nervous cases were the worst, and in greatest number. Many men went raving mad. The shell-shock victims clawed at their mouths unceasingly, or lay motionless like corpses with staring eyes, or trembled in every limb, moaning miserably and afflicted with a great terror.

To the Germans the Somme battlefields were not only shambles but a territory which the devil claimed as his own for the torture of men's brains and souls before they died in the furnace fires. A spirit of revolt against all this crept into the minds of men who retained their sanity—a revolt against the people who had ordained this vast outrage against God and humanity.

Into their letters there crept bitter, burning words against "the millionaires—who grow rich out of the war," against the high people who live in comfort behind the lines. Letters from home inflamed these thoughts.

It was not good reading for men under shell fire.

"It seems that you soldiers fight so that official stay-at-homes can treat us as female criminals. Tell me, dear husband, are you a criminal when you fight in the trenches, or why do people treat women and children here as such? . . .

"For the poor here it is terrible, and yet the rich, the gilded ones, the bloated aristocrats, gobble up everything in front of our very eyes. . . . All soldiers—friend and foe—ought to throw down their

weapons and go on strike, so that this war which enslaves the people more may cease."

Thousands of letters, all in this strain, were reaching the German soldiers on the Somme, and they did not strengthen the moral of men already victims of terror and despair.

PHYSIC FOR FAINT-HEARTED.

Behind the lines deserters were shot in batches. To those in front came Orders of the Day, warning them, exhorting them, commanding them to hold fast.

"To the hesitating and faint-hearted in the regiment," says one of these Orders, "I would say the following:—

"What the Englishman can do the German can do also. Or if, on the other hand, the Englishman really is a better and superior being, he would be quite justified in his aim as regards this war, viz., the extermination of the German. There is a further point to be noted: this is the first time we have been in the line on the Somme, and, what is more, we are there at a time when things are more calm. The English regiments opposing us have been in the firing-line for the second, and in some cases even the third, time. Heads up, and play the man!"

It was easy to write such documents. It was more difficult to bring up reserves of men and ammunition. The German command was hard pressed by the end of September.

From July 1 to September 8, it has been reckoned, from what I believe was trustworthy information, that fifty-three German divisions in all were engaged against the Allies on the Somme battle front. Out of these, fourteen were still in the line on September 8.

Twenty-eight had been withdrawn, broken and exhausted, to quieter areas. Eleven more had been withdrawn to rest billets. Under the Allies' artillery fire and infantry attacks the average life of a German division as a unit fit for service on the Somme was nineteen days. More than two new German divisions had to be brought into the front line every week since the end of June to replace those smashed in the process of resisting the Allied attack. It is now reckoned by competent observers in the field that well over 120 German divisions have been passed through the ordeal of the Somme—this Bath of Blood, as they call it; this number including those which have appeared there more than once.

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